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Press agents

LAST Thursday former Nixon henchman G. Gordon Liddy popped up on the television screen and recalled how he once thought of killing columnist Jack Anderson to keep him from publishing intelligence information that the White House wanted to keep secret.

Exactly a week earlier Adm. Stansfield Turner, current director of the Central Intelligence Agency, stood before the nation's newspaper editors and brashly acknowledged that the Carter administration has resurrected the practice of recruiting American journalists to spy for the United States in foreign lands.

While obviously an extreme exaggeration, the view of Mr. Liddy that government secrets should be kept out of the hands of journalists at all costs is one shared by many government officials. Yet

Adm. Turner and others are quite ready to hire that same journalist to gather intelligence secrets on behalf of the government. And they will readily suggest that anyone who declines to do so is being unpatriotic.



The simple translation of such a conflict is that the government would really prefer for the press to be its agent, gathering all the information it can but publishing only what the government wants published. That's the way it works in almost every nation but this one. And the fact that we don't operate that way is the insurance that we still have what is in effect the only truly free press in the world today.

Unfortunately some people such as Adm. Turner, and President Carter if he is condoning this CIA policy, do not understand that to remain truly free the press must avoid any official relationship with the government, even well-intentioned snooping on America's enemies.

The press can and should snoop, but it should do so independently and on behalf of the American public. This does not mean that the press should go around divulging national secrets or publishing intelligence information that would be detrimental to the national interest. In most cases any foreign correspondent who stumbles on some important intelligence information would see that it somehow found its way to the proper authorities.

But to use the cover of legitimate press function to deliberately go about gathering intelligence for the government is a complete subversion of press responsibility. It not only endangers the life of the reporter, but it does irreparable harm to the credibility of the news organization and to the American press in general.

Most of America thought the practice of using newsmen as spies had ended with the Nixon administration. But now that Adm. Turner has again dragged this skeleton out of the closet, it is time to dismantle it forever. The proposed charter for the FBI and the CIA, now being considered in Congress, should be amended to flatly prohibit the recruitment and employment of legitimate U.S. journalists for the purpose of espionage.

The gathering of foreign intelligence is vital to the U.S. interest, and government agencies such as the CIA should go about the task with resolute purpose. But the gathering of news abroad is also a vital function of a distinctly separate institution equally as important to the American people. And the two should remain that way.